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How to cite:

Beaven, Tita (2019). 'Your language development': harnessing openness to integrate independent language learning into the curriculum. In: Comas-Quinn, Anna; Beaven, Ana and Sawhill, Barbara eds. New case studies of openness in and beyond the language classroom. Research-publishing.net, pp. 145–156.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.14705/rpnet.2019.37.972>

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10 ‘Your language development’: harnessing openness to integrate independent language learning into the curriculum

Tita Beaven¹

Abstract

The first module of the online Master of Arts (MA) in Translation at the Open University, Introduction to Translation Theory and Practice, includes a language development strand which encourages students to diagnose their own language development needs and introduces them to tools, resources, strategies, and learning communities that will enable them to independently develop their language skills in both their L1 and their L2, and to consider language development as part of their ongoing professional development as translators, mirroring the practice of many professionals. This chapter considers the extent to which the language development activities and practices can be considered ‘open’.

Keywords: translation, lifelong learning, OEP, open pedagogies.

1. Context of the project

The Open University (UK) is a distance learning university offering courses in a blended or fully online mode. In 2017, we launched a two-year part-time MA in Translation, which is fully online, partly to mirror the demands of

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How to cite this chapter: Beaven, T. (2019). ‘Your language development’: harnessing openness to integrate independent language learning into the curriculum. In A. Comas-Quinn, A. Beaven & B. Sawhill (Eds), *New case studies of openness in and beyond the language classroom* (pp. 145-156). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.37.972>

the fast-growing translation services industry. It is delivered on an Open edX platform, enabling students to access the multimedia course content and engage in forum activities related to the course. Students complete three modules (Introduction to Translation Theory and Practice, Translation in Practice, and Extended Translation Project/Dissertation), working to and from English and French, Spanish, German, Italian, Mandarin, or Arabic.

Students are adults, mostly aged between 30 and 60, and 60% female versus 40% male. Most are UK students, although about 40% are from other countries, mainly French, German, Italian, and Spanish. Most have studied languages before, but others come from disciplines including tourism, health, business, or law. As part of the entry requirements for the course, students have to hold a Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level C1 in one of their two languages, and a level C2 in the other – equivalent to an International English Language Testing System level seven to eight for one language and above nine for the other.

Students are taught together in each module, completing activities that are offered in the different language combinations and discussing language-specific activities and issues in language-specific online forums. They contribute to more generic discussion in a cohort-wide forum. The tutors, all translation scholars or professionals, provide language-specific feedback on the translation tasks and discussions, give feedback in cohort-wide discussions, and mark and give feedback on their students' assessed work. The first module explores different approaches to translation and the wider cultural, ethical, and professional contexts of translation.

Although as part of the design of the MA we wanted to offer translation activities in all the language combinations to suit the plurilingual nature of the student cohort, we were also aware that, because of time, resources, and the sheer complexity of the instructional design, we would not be able to provide advanced language instruction to the students in all seven languages. In this chapter, I explain how we designed the language development strand of the course using a wide range of open and freely available resources.

2. Intended outcomes

It might be argued that students doing an MA in Translation should already possess the advanced language skills necessary to operate between the two languages they are specialising in. Although we require students to have a level C1 in one of their two languages and a level C2 in the other, we also want them to audit their language skills in both their languages, and to evaluate what language aspects (lexical, phonological, syntactical, sociolinguistic, or pragmatic) they need to develop further (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 13). We tell students that, as future translators, they need to constantly update their language skills in both their languages, and we present a number of interviews with professional translators who discuss their approaches to the continuous professional development of their language skills. We also give students the opportunity to explore tools, resources, strategies, and communities to develop their language skills.

3. Nuts and bolts

3.1. The language development activities

The language development strand consists of the following sections:

- introduction, language proficiency (Week 1): an introduction to the CEFR levels, where students have to assess and record their language proficiency using the Language Passport document on the Europass;
- language proficiency and translator competence (Week 2): an exploration of how linguistic competence fits into different models of translation competence. An analysis of case studies of translation students' language development needs;
- effective language learning habits (Week 3): an analysis of the habits of effective language learners and a personal language development plan for the next four weeks;

- bilingual dictionaries (Weeks 4-5);
- expanding your vocabulary (Week 6-7);
- reviewing your language learning routine (Weeks 8-9);
- monolingual dictionaries and reference books (Weeks 10-11);
- revising your written work (Weeks 12-13);
- language for technical, non-specialised translation (Weeks 14-15);
- developing your research and writing skills (Weeks 18-21); and
- developing your speaking skills (Weeks 22-24).

In the first two sections of their language development work, students look at a number of case studies, select one of them, and write up a short analysis discussing the potential language difficulties this person may encounter as a student of translation, and what their language development should focus on. They share and discuss their analysis in the forum, and then write a short paragraph analysing their own potential language difficulties based on the audit they carry out of their own language competence. They include both their language passport and the analysis of their potential difficulties as a formative section of their first assignment.

3.2. Sample case study: Silvia

Silvia is originally from Italy, although she has lived in Scotland for over 30 years. She still speaks Italian with her family and friends back home, and often spends her holidays in Italy, but does not do much else to keep up her Italian. She has occasionally helped in her husband's company, translating emails and invoices, and interpreting when Italian clients have visited. She never studied English formally, and although she speaks it fluently, she is not very confident when writing (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Extract from L801: introduction to translation theory and practice

Mother tongue(s)	Italian				
Other language(s)	UNDERSTANDING		SPEAKING		WRITING
	Listening	Reading	Spoken interaction	Spoken production	
English	C1	B2	C1	C1	B2

In the third section of the language development strand, students are introduced the habits of highly effective, experienced language learners and consider the practices of these learners in order to formulate a language development plan for themselves. The advice students look at relates to the recent explosion of online language learning resources and language learners' communities on social media based around the polyglot movement. They are introduced to the advice that polyglots provide through their blogs or other social media, and are asked to note the most common tips and techniques and those that they think would be useful to them personally as developing translators.

The advice they look at includes the following blog posts:

- The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Language Learners²;
- How Polyglots Learn Languages and Stay Sane: Gems of Wisdom from 10 of the Best³; and
- How to learn a new language: 7 secrets from TED Translators⁴.

The advice provided in these resources suggests that effective language learners:

- have clear goals, and keep the goal in sight;

2. <https://blog.thelinguist.com/habits-effective-language-learners>

3. <https://www.fluentu.com/blog/how-polyglots-learn-language/>

4. <https://blog.ted.com/how-to-learn-a-new-language-7-secrets-from-ted-translators/>

- do not cram, but are consistent and work regularly and in short, manageable periods of time to avoid burn-out;
- are not afraid to make mistakes;
- surround themselves with the language and opportunities to use it; and
- make themselves accountable for their own learning.

Students write a language development plan for themselves for the next four weeks, indicating their goals, the main pieces of advice they are going to follow from the expert language learners above, the activities they are going to undertake, and how regularly they will do them, being as specific as possible (e.g. 30 minutes a day/five days a week). They submit their plan as a formative part of their first assignment.

Approximately a month later, students are asked to review their language learning routine and draw up some SMART⁵ (specific, measurable, ambitious, realistic, time-bound) goals for their language learning. Again, they are directed to several online resources about goal setting and how to do this specifically for language learning, and they produce a new language development plan for the subsequent six to eight weeks, which they share with fellow-students in the forum and also include as a formative part of their next assignment. Sharing their learning plan and goals with others makes students publicly accountable for the work they have set for themselves, and that public accountability means they are more likely to actually fulfil their plan. Their teacher's feedback also serves to validate their plan, and to motivate them to stick to it.

In later units, we look at specific resources and tools which may be considered more or less 'open'. For instance, the bilingual dictionaries section looks at the online dictionary WordReference⁶. Whereas neither the dictionary data nor

5. <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/smart-goals.htm>

6. <http://www.wordreference.com/licensing/>

the software are openly licenced, the dictionary includes very active language-specific forums where anyone can ask for advice regarding the meaning of specific terms or their translations. Regular contributors are rewarded by being designated as ‘Senior members’. In the unit about developing their speaking skills, students read an interview with a practising translator who provides advice about why developing your speaking skills can also be useful in terms of contacting clients in their L1, for instance. Students are introduced to the concept of language exchanges and are encouraged to find themselves a conversation partner. One of the platforms we suggest is italki⁷, a language teacher marketplace that also offers language exchange partnerships for free, and that has a strong learning community aspect, where teachers and learners regularly exchange tips, resources, and experiences.

Finally, in the section on language for technical, non-specialised translation, students are introduced to TED talks as a source of language from different technical, non-specialised domains. TED videos cover a wide range of topics including science and technology, business, and global issues in more than 100 languages. TED Translators is a community of volunteers who subtitle TED talks, and in other sections of the course we encourage students to engage with volunteering translation through TED or other online translation communities. Similarly, in the next module, we also include a section on Audio Visual (AV) translation, and encourage students to gain AV technical translation skills through engaging with TED Translators amongst others. However, in the language development strand of the course, we engage with TED talks for the purposes of developing students’ technical, non-specialised vocabulary.

In the first activity in this section, students are asked to watch a TED talk: Ramesh Raskar Imaging at a trillion frames per second⁸, which explains how femto-photography, a new type of very detailed imaging that visualises objects at one trillion frames per second, works, and its possible future applications. Students are asked to make a list of the terms they would find difficult to translate. As

7. <https://www.italki.com/partners>

8. https://www.ted.com/talks/ramesh_raskar_a_camera_that_takes_one_trillion_frames_per_second?language=en

with other activities in the language development strand, the discussion includes a ‘worked example’, where I, as the author of the materials and teacher, explain my own process in dealing with the question:

“Some of the vocabulary in the list is made up of specialist terms used in this technical area which I am not familiar with. Others, such as ‘health/scientific imaging’, or the verb ‘to open source’ are terms that are in my English vocabulary, but I am not sure how to say in my other language. Others, such as ‘bullet’ or ‘pulse’ are terms that I understand and can translate, but I am not entirely sure if they have a specialist meaning in this context”.

Then, students are asked to find how to translate those terms by using some of the resources previously introduced in the course, such as the forum discussions in online dictionary sites such as Wordreference⁹, or the Reverso Context¹⁰ website, which enables users to look up words or expressions and see examples of those words in context and their translations. Finally, they look at the subtitles in their other language to see how these items have been translated.

After this specific activity, students are encouraged to continue using TED talks to find videos that are relevant to the fields they might want to specialise in and build their vocabulary in those areas. Topics range from astronomy to bioethics, health care, microfinance, or urban planning, to name but a few, so students can find relevant material to fit their own interests.

The use of ‘worked examples’ occurs regularly in the language development strand. For instance, in an activity about using monolingual dictionaries and other reference materials, we consider an extract from *Treasure Island*, a children’s classic which students have already looked at in a section of the course on translation and children’s literature. The extract, from Chapter 13, reads:

9. <http://www.wordreference.com/>

10. <http://context.reverso.net/>

“The HISPANIOLA was rolling scuppers under in the ocean swell. The booms were tearing at the blocks, the rudder was banging to and fro, and the whole ship creaking, groaning, and jumping like a manufactory. I had to cling tight to the backstay, and the world turned giddily before my eyes, for though I was a good enough sailor when there was way on, this standing still and being rolled about like a bottle was a thing I never learned to stand without a qualm or so, above all in the morning, on an empty stomach” (Stevenson, 1883, pp. 120-121).

Treasure Island contains many references to nautical terms in the various passages about the Hispaniola, the schooner on which the protagonists travel to the island, and a translator might not necessarily be an expert in that terminology. In the activity, students have to look up those terms, and suggest translations into their other language. Throughout the activity, as the teacher and author, I explain how I went about looking these terms up in various resources, and the doubts I had about the meaning or translation of some of those terms. For instance, after looking up the word ‘block’ in the Oxford Spanish Dictionary, I commented in the course materials: “[m]y intuition tells me that none of those definitions in the dictionary are the right meaning of the word ‘block’ in the text. To find out more, I would need to look it up in a monolingual dictionary, or in a reference book such as an encyclopaedia. I would also need to look up the word ‘boom’ to understand what it means in this context”, and then I proceeded to look up the terms in other reference materials and to ascertain their meaning in this context. That way, students can understand the process that a translator or experienced language learner might go through when looking up terminology they are not familiar with, and it also serves to reinforce the idea that expert translators, and not just novices, also engage in this type of activity.

3.3. But is it open?

The previous section provided an overview of the types of activities and resources that are included in the language development strand of the MA module on Translation Theory and Practice. Some of the activities rely on freely available resources, others on resources that are free AND openly licenced, and others on

sites that include communities of users. All these are, to some extent, ‘open’, but it might be useful to analyse in more detail what this means.

In a recent blog post, David Wiley (2018a), quoting an article by Michael Feldstein (2013), explains how we can conceive courseware as the combination of (1) content, (2) platform, and (3) design. For Wiley (2018a), the content and the platform can be open; open content is content that is openly licenced, and an open platform is one that uses open software. Wiley (2018a) makes the point that often, although the content is open, the platform is not. In the case of the MA module discussed in this chapter, the situation is even more complex in that the platform on which the course is built, Open edX, is open, but the course sits behind a hefty paywall, in the sense that it is only available to students registered on the MA at the Open University. The content is not openly licenced, and the copyright belongs to the Open University. It uses some freely available, online resources that are not openly licenced, and others, such as the TED talks, that are. Wiley (2018b) has coined the term “OER¹¹ enabled pedagogies” to describe “the set of teaching and learning practices only possible or practical when you have permission to engage in the 5R activities” (n.p.) (i.e. retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute). In that sense, the course cannot be said to adhere to OER enabled pedagogies.

However, in a recent article, Cronin and MacLaren (2018) provide an overview of the Open Educational Practice (OEP) literature and remind us that conceptualisations of OEP vary enormously. Indeed, in an early definition from the Open Educational Quality Initiative (OPAL) project, OEP was defined as “a collaborative practice in which resources are shared by making them openly available, and pedagogical practices are employed which rely on social interaction, knowledge creation, peer learning, and shared learning practices” (Ehlers, 2013, p. 94) with the aim of improving education and promoting innovation. Also in the OPAL project, Andrade et al. (2011) defined OEP as “practices which support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and

11. Open Educational Resource

empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path” (p. 12). In the UKOER project, [McGill et al. \(2013\)](#) suggested that OEP have the potential to “flatten the traditional hierarchy and change the balance of power in learner/teacher relationships” (p. 10), ideas that have been further developed through the concepts of open pedagogy and open digital pedagogy, with their focus on dialogue, on bringing disparate learning spaces together, and on questioning the power relations that exist within and outside higher education ([Cronin & MacLaren, 2018](#)).

The activities in the language development strand of the MA in Translation aim to achieve some of these objectives. Indeed, they rely on interaction between students, on peer learning, and on the sharing of learning practices both within the community of students and beyond, by tapping into the online polyglot community and into communities of learners beyond the university in language exchange platforms. They also emphasise the role learners play in co-producing their own lifelong language learning path, as that is, indeed, the main aim of the language development strand. Finally, through presenting the experience of the author/teacher as a translator in some of the ‘worked examples’ in the activities, as well as through the interviews with other practising translators about their own lifelong language development work, the course goes some way to flatten the teacher/student hierarchy.

4. Conclusions

The language development strand of the MA in Translation course on Translation Theory and Practice aims to enable students to identify their own language learning needs and provide them with the tools, resources, strategies, and communities that will enable them to continue developing their language skills for their rest of their career.

The extent to which the course is open clearly depends on the definition of ‘open’ that we decide to use. Whilst it is not an OER nor does it fulfil the requirements of an OER enabled pedagogy, I would argue that it conforms to some of the

OEPs identified by the OPAL team and associated with the concepts of open pedagogy and open digital pedagogy. What it also illustrates is the difficulty of applying a seeming ‘simple’ term such as ‘open’ to a substantial piece of courseware such as this.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
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New case studies of openness in and beyond the language classroom
Edited by Anna Comas-Quinn, Ana Beaven, and Barbara Sawhill

Publication date: 2019/07/26

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Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-51-1 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-52-8 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-50-4 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)

Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, UK: British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: juillet 2019.

